

**STATEMENT FOR
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UNDER SECRETARY FOR NATURAL RESOURCES AND ENVIRONMENT
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
BEFORE
SENATE COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES
SUBCOMMITTEE ON PUBLIC LANDS AND FORESTS
CONCERNING
FOREST RESTORATION AND HAZARDOUS FUELS REDUCTION EFFORTS
IN OREGON AND WASHINGTON**

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INTRODUCTION

Mr. Chairman and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on the forest restoration and hazardous fuels reduction efforts in the forests of Oregon and Washington. The U.S. Forest Service, Pacific Northwest Region is dedicated to progress toward improved forest health and landscape resiliency. In fact, these are the Region's top resource management priorities. The Region will continue to use its authorities to strategically implement vegetative treatments, and to use collaborative approaches with partners and landowners to accomplish this goal.

The Administration credits implementation of the Healthy Forests Initiative (HFI) and the Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2003 (HFRA) in part for the progress made to date. The Act is a significant legislative tool that allows timely implementation of fuels treatment and forest restoration projects critical to reducing the risk of severe wildfire to communities and to sensitive ecological resources. These projects are beneficial to forest health as well as supportive of the regional economy.

THE FORESTS IN OREGON AND WASHINGTON

The Pacific Northwest Region of the USDA Forest Service contains 19 (administered as 16 units) National Forests, a National Scenic Area, a National Grassland, and 2 National Volcanic Monuments, covering approximately 25 million acres, all within the States of Oregon and Washington.

Forest health conditions are mixed across the Region. Some forest insects and diseases have declined, while others have taken hold and expanded. In the last two years, precipitation levels have been at or above normal in western Oregon and Washington resulting in less moisture stress and greater resistance to bark beetle attacks. On the other hand, Mountain Pine Beetle outbreaks have continued to expand across the eastside of the region as a result of dense stand conditions and lower precipitation, especially along the east slope of the Cascades. Drought conditions continue to persist in eastern Oregon and southeastern Washington. Damage by defoliating insects has increased in the Region with expansion of western spruce budworm. Climate and weather patterns continue to influence the start and spread of forest pests and diseases. If the warmer, dryer trends occurring in the eastern portion of the region continue, we expect to see increased damage from bark beetles and defoliators, particularly in overstocked stands. Mortality

related to these infestations and wind events which blow down trees create conditions for increased fire risk.

Large fires are occurring in the Region with potential negative affects. The average number of wildfire acres burned across all ownerships has increased substantially since fiscal year 2000. In fiscal year 2000, about 1100 fires burned approximately 200,000 acres. In fiscal year 2006, the number of fires rose to almost 1700 and burned over 450,000 acres. On average, the length of the fire season appears to be 7-10 days longer today as compared to 20 years ago. Large fires impacted watersheds, habitats, trails, and created conditions in which pest infestation and invasive species could take hold, and resulted in the loss of economically valuable forest products.

Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) areas are expanding. There are approximately 16 million acres of Pacific Northwest national forests within Fire Regimes (FR) I, II, and III. These areas are likely to have highly altered vegetation as a result of changed fire disturbance processes (Condition Class 2 and 3), and therefore are at increased risk from uncharacteristic fire. Approximately 530,000 of these acres are within the WUI. The land in WUI is growing as development adjacent to NFS lands expands challenging our ability to treat and maintain all high priority lands.

The Pacific Northwest Region is striving to increasingly integrate its vegetation management and fuels reduction programs to improve treatment cost effectiveness, efficiency and to accomplish multiple outcomes for forest health, habitat and municipal watershed protection. All treatments which remove vegetation, including merchantable timber, are based on restoration oriented prescriptions. Timber volume offered reached a region-wide low of 335 mmbf in fiscal year 2002 and has rebounded to 593 mmbf in fiscal year 2007. We will work to maintain this level into FY 2008 to meet the treatment needs of our forests and to provide a stable supply of material for regional wood products and furniture industries.

A viable regional timber industry is an important element in meeting the goal of healthy forests. Currently, the forest products industry is experiencing difficult times and strained markets. Prices for timber products have been falling and are expected to fall further in 2008. Nationally, home sales are at a 5 year low while inventory of unsold new homes is about double what it was five years ago. Housing starts are projected to remain weak through 2008. Northeast Oregon has recently seen the closure of 2 key sawmills, affecting communities throughout that part of the state. North central Washington has also seen the closure of 2 mills, affecting projects on the Okanogan-Wenatchee NF. This loss of industry reduces the opportunity to meet healthy forest goals and allow the use of materials from forest treatments.

On a positive note, two new mills have opened in northwest Washington providing opportunity for timber sales from the Mt Baker Snoqualmie, and Olympic forests. Also, several companies have begun to use innovative and new technologies to utilize small-diameter trees and woody biomass in the Region. Biomass energy facilities are scheduled to open within the next couple of years in central and southern Oregon, and other new biomass starts are being considered that have the potential to allow more

national forest lands to be managed to reduce fuel loading, protect communities, and improve forest health. Recently, prices for biomass, coupled with an Oregon tax credit, have allowed landing slash materials that normally would be burned, to be hauled in excess of 70 miles from the Fremont-Winema National Forest over the crest of the Cascade Mountains to White City, near Medford, Oregon. This example reflects a potential for an improvement in the market for biomass removal within the region.

HAZARDOUS FUELS REDUCTION

To address dangerous fire and fuels conditions across the west, we are aggressively treating fuels, and we are increasing our emphasis on collaborating with our local, state and tribal partners.

Some of our specific accomplishments in reducing hazardous fuels include:

- From 2000 through 2007 the Forest Service and Department of the Interior (DOI) land management agencies have treated nearly 25 million acres for fuels reduction on federal lands, including 20 million acres treated through hazardous fuels reduction programs and over 5 million acres of landscape restoration accomplished through other land management activities.
- Despite a substantial national wildfire suppression workload, the Forest Service and DOI reduced fuels and improved ecosystem health on more than 4.8 million acres of land nationally in 2007, of which over 3 million acres were treated through hazardous fuels reduction programs and 1.8 million acres of land restoration accomplished through other land management activities.
- In 2006, to more adequately demonstrate the benefits of fuels reduction treatments on fire risk, the Administration has begun to measure changes in the Condition Class of National Forest System land and is currently working on metrics for forest health changes that will help demonstrate the outcomes of projects that remove fuels.
- The Pacific Northwest Region treated over 940,000 acres from hazardous fuels reduction programs and land restoration accomplished through other land management activities from fiscal year 2000 through 2007. The Region's priority is to reduce risk of damage from wildfire in municipal watersheds and in T&E habitat on national forest lands and on private property and infrastructure on adjacent lands. This effort resulted in over 432,000 acres treated in the WUI on all lands and about 4,000 acres treated to reduce risk to T&E habitat in the region.
- The Pacific Northwest Region focused 94 percent of its treatments in FR 1, 2, or 3 in 2007. This was accomplished by integration of vegetative management treatments from multiple programs. Five of 21 large wildfires burned into fuel treatments in 2007. The region sent inter-disciplinary teams to assess three of these fire areas and through their observations found that the number of acres that were burned severely was reduced as a result of forest treatments.

- USDA and DOI, in collaboration with our non-federal partners, continue to increase the community protection emphasis of the hazardous fuels program. Community Wildfire Protection Plans (CWPPs) assist localities to reduce risk and set priorities. Over 1,100 CWPPs covering 3,000 communities have been completed nationally and an additional 450 plans are progressing toward completion. In the Pacific Northwest Region 40 CWPPs have been completed in Oregon (covering 291 communities) and 24 CWPPs in Washington (covering 62 communities).

FOREST RESTORATION IN OREGON AND WASHINGTON

The Pacific Northwest Region is committed to forest restoration and other management actions to improve landscape resiliency. The Region seeks to achieve this objective by:

- Revising fire management plans to implement wildland fire use.
- Increasing the ability to achieve multiple objectives in vegetation management and fuels treatment investments:
 1. Increase use of HFRA, HFI and stewardship contracting tools.
 2. Strategic placement of treatments to change fire behavior (to increase suppression effectiveness, reduce suppression costs and protect watersheds).
 3. Working with partners and adjacent landowners
 4. Continuing to implement the Northwest Forest Plan.
 5. Incorporate climate change considerations in vegetation treatments
- Implementing the aquatic restoration strategy with a focus on watershed function, resiliency, water quality, and salmon recovery.

The Region has begun the process of revising fire management plans to better integrate wildland fire use. The region recognizes that increasing wildland fire use (WFU) is critical to improving ecosystem resiliency over the long term. In 2007, we increased our acres available for WFU by 200,000 acres, to a total of 2,360,892 acres. We have increased funding for further expansion of wildland fire use in 2008.

The LANDFIRE project has now been completed for the western third of the mainland United States. The data are being used in setting hazardous fuel treatment priorities. The Forest Service is also testing methods of modeling fire risk with LANDFIRE data to help better inform hazardous fuel treatment prioritization. In addition the agency has begun allocating fuels reduction funds and measuring the effectiveness of those treatments in terms of wildfire risk reduction.

The Forest Service will continue to strive toward full implementation of the Northwest Forest Plan Amendments (NWFP). According to the “Northwest Forest Plan – The First 10 years (1994-2003): Synthesis of Monitoring and Research Results” published in October 2006, the Plan’s success cannot be fully determined in 10 years, but some trends are clear. The most notable successes are associated with protection of old-growth and riparian forests and associated species. Approximately 80% of all federal lands in the NWFP area are in reserves or are congressionally or administratively withdrawn. Vegetation management occurring on the lands in reserves, including timber harvest, is allowed to promote the restorative objectives of those reserves, i.e., riparian or old

growth habitat protection or enhancement. Much has been learned about the distribution and habitat needs of old growth dependent species and how to use silvicultural practices to accelerate old-growth structural and functional development. Watersheds are being restored, roads de-commissioned, and species protected. Timber harvest has been lower than planned and budgeted for in the NWFP area and this has significantly impacted Pacific Northwest communities. Between 1995 and 2007 Region 6 offered on average 307 mmbf per year, Today, the volume offered in the Region is almost twice that figure.

The Administration supports full implementation of the Northwest Forest Plan and its timber sale component to meet the Plan's balanced purposes. The fiscal year 2007 President's Budget request to Congress reflected this support. The Region has been allocated increasing levels of funding to implement the NWFP and the NWFP forests have ramped up the offered volume as a result of this additional funding in fiscal year 2007, and expect to do so in fiscal years 2008 and 2009.

Climate change has the potential to modify forests in the Pacific Northwest. Forest management can play a dual role in addressing global climate change, including: 1) management designed to position forests to remain healthy and resilient in the face of the environmental stresses associated with changing climate (adaptation role), and 2) management to reduce the build-up of atmospheric CO₂ to mitigate the rate of climate change (mitigation role). Our fuels treatment and ecosystem restoration activities can be important as a way to achieve adaptation and mitigation objectives. We will apply forest restoration activities to improve the capacity of forests to resist the environmental stresses of changing climate while producing, as a by-product of thinning, materials used for biofuels that also reduce fossil fuels consumption.

The Region is implementing recommendations of its Aquatic Restoration Strategy. This strategy identifies the highest priority restoration areas, outlines specific goals and objectives, and describes key actions needed to achieve them. Implementation of the strategy is showing positive initial results. For example, eleven watershed action plans have been developed for the highest priority areas. Agency partners strongly support agency restoration projects. For example, in fiscal year 2007, partners contributed almost \$8 million towards restoration projects, enabling the Forest Service to achieve \$3 of restoration work for every \$1 of appropriated funds.

COLLABORATION TO TREAT PACIFIC NORTHWEST FORESTS

Collaboration among communities, industry and local Forest Service staff has resulted in effective and successful hazardous fuels reduction projects. The Region is working to expand its use of the HFRA and HFI authorities to expedite strategic restoration efforts and to utilize stewardship contracting to carry them out. More than 84 stewardship projects have been approved in the Region since the initiation of Stewardship contracting in 2003. All of these projects focus on restoration and/or fuels reduction using thinning to accomplish forest health, habitat improvement, watershed improvement, and fuels reduction. Stewardship contracting in the Region, from utilization of retained receipts and non-monetary exchange for goods for services, is resulting in more acres being treated, improved relationships and partnerships for forest management projects and contributions to local economies.

The Lakeview Federal Sustained Yield Unit is a long standing collaborative effort (more than 10 years) that has focused on sustainable management and community partnership. The Fremont-Winema National Forest will have the Region's first 10-year stewardship contract within the Unit and is working on a second 10 year contract outside of the Sustained Yield Unit. These Forest and community efforts have allowed Fremont Sawmill to construct a small sawlog mill, and a biomass energy plant is planned adjacent to the Fremont sawmill in Lakeview, Oregon. These new facilities will allow the Fremont-Winema to manage more lands to improve forest health and reduce fuels by harvest and removal of small diameter material.

Another example of a community developed collaborative effort that is benefiting national forest management is on the Colville National Forest in northeast Washington. This collaborative effort has been ongoing for several years and has worked hard to facilitate HFRA projects and stewardship contracting projects. Most of the 12 approved stewardship contracting projects were designed to reduce fuel loading in the WUI by removing small diameter material. The Vaagens mill in Colville is using innovation and new technology to use very small diameter material for dimensional lumber. In addition, the Colville National Forest is one of three Model Forest Projects under the Proof of Concept Program. As a Model Forest, the Region is committed to a ten year flexible budget to meet objectives of restoration, ecosystem services, recreation and sustainable forestry with an emphasis on local social and economic factors.

Within the NWFP area collaboration and the use of stewardship contracting are producing restoration gains on all forests, and in particular, the Siuslaw and Mt Hood national forests. Both national forests have worked with their respective community partnership groups to improve wildlife habitat by thinning in young stands, predominantly young managed plantations. In addition, both forests are using thinning practices to accelerate the development of old growth structure. Receipts from these thinnings are being used to improve fisheries habitat, close and/or manage roads to reduce sedimentation, remove invasive weeds, replace culverts to improve fish passage, and meet many other restoration objectives. Forests within the fire prone portions of the NWFP are also using thinning to improve the resiliency of timber stands as well as provide for the sustainability of northern spotted owl and other old growth dependent species.

CONCLUSION

Mr. Chairman, though we have much to do, we are making progress in Oregon and Washington regarding the health and resilience of Pacific Northwest forests. We believe the administration's focus on meeting the principals of the Northwest Forest Plan and use of the tools afforded through HFI and HFRA are producing positive results for the forest and communities.

I would be happy to answer any questions the subcommittee members may have.